As an incoming freshman, FA-SET leaders tell you, “Every Tech student was the smartest person in high school.” Ask your average—or even above-average—student what he or she thinks about his peers, and the answer will likely include something about respect and matching intellect. So why do we need an honors program?

As covered in Technique recently, a committee has proposed a plan for such a program to the Provost’s Office. The aspect of the proposed honors program that I’m most concerned about is consistency across majors. According to the committee, honors classes would be implemented mainly in the Institute core. However, for a student’s third and fourth year, providing an honors curriculum would be up to that student’s major school. As a result, as Vice Provost Bob McMath admitted, there would be “different development between schools.”

Different—and likely inferior: there would be a disparity among schools whose chairs place different emphasis on the program, among larger schools and smaller schools. How is it fair, or desirable even, if the quality of your honors degree is dependent on your major?

As an Electrical Engineering major, I have a hard time seeing how a workable honors program could be implemented in a school the size of the School of ECE. Much of our major core includes labs classes that are run primarily by TAs, not professors. Our third- and fourth-year curriculum also includes the bulk of our 20-plus hours of major electives. The school offers a multitude of electives in each of its 10 concentration areas, but often no more than one or two sections of each elective are offered each semester. How should you choose between an elective you’re interested in and an honors elective that you might not be interested in?

More importantly, how do you find enough professors and class space to provide a satisfactory number and diversity of honors classes? The committee also defines honors class as having better student-faculty interaction and more “intellectual vitality.” But just designating electives as “honors” does not ensure this. I took honors math courses for Calc 2 through DiFQ, and my experiences ranged from terrible to excellent.

I’ve also taken regular elective classes where I felt I received honors-quality interaction because the professor got to know his students and engaged them through enthusiastic lecture, questions and well-crafted assignments. An honors program might be beneficial in liberal arts classes, where small class size and attentive students may foster better discussion and participation, but in the case of most engineering classes, quality comes primarily from the professor. Honors classes can only take these exceptional professors away from students who may not be honors material but are still interested in what the professor wants to teach.

The committee also says honors classes will be more “interdisciplinary.” But in core classes, the basics must be learned—there is only so much interdisciplinary material that can be incorporated.

In addition, most students who would be eligible for an honors program will likely have received AP or high school credit for much of their core. Instead, why not encourage interdisciplinary study by strengthening our under-funded Schools of LCG and Modern Languages? Or how about undergraduate research? Though it’s part of the new Quality Enhancement Plan, Tech’s undergraduate research is nowhere near the status of, for example, MIT’s Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program, which is a core component of its students’ undergraduate education. At Tech, there is plenty of undergraduate research going on, the responsibility to find a professor and research interest lies primarily with the student. A stronger, more centralized undergraduate research program would offer an equally powerful incentive to attract students to Tech, and would have additional benefits as well.

But if the Provost’s Office is set on an honors program, then aspects of the current plan needs to be seriously reexamined. They must not simply look to peer universities’ honors programs for guidance; they must consider the unique dynamic of Tech’s student population.

It seems like the real reason for all this is simply to get back the students we might lose to universities with honors programs (namely UGA). But with no scholarship component, the proposed program may be less effective. Let’s not turn the honors program into a second-rate President’s Scholarship. It would only create even more of a divide among students at a university that prides itself on the quality of its student body as a whole.
Value your time in college, but get over Tech

Tuesday I was accepted to a summer internship program. This requisite college job conjures up images of walking the hallowed corridors of Capitol Hill and strolling with high-powered society on the Mall. That’s how things were for me last summer. This summer, though, in between leaving Tech and heading to graduate school, things will be a little different—I’ll be on a farm.

Have I ever been on a farm? Not exactly, as long as petting zoos and Nintendo’s Joyous Return. However, I have been to a farm. I was actually raised on one in agriculture. So why the diversion, the sudden cut? We all need to step outside our element, especially the routine of Tech. Three years has been enough.

I won’t miss Tech when I’m gone. I will miss college as an undergraduate. They are not the same. It’s disheartening to hear undergraduate. They are not the same. It’s disheartening to hear about breaking new coverage at commencement. Start at least one more time that doesn’t conflict with a time that doesn’t conflict with the IBB, one would have thought there actually was a real precise instantiation of brilliance that no one is safe.

Striking a blow for pampered corporate executives the world over, the RIAA plans to file lawsuits against students who have been using the new Internet2 allegedly to trade copyrighted music and movies. The type of cases heard by researchers at universities all across the world to explore the future of the internet—and it just happens that the IBB, one would have thought there actually was a real precise instantiation of brilliance that no one is safe.

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Cary Sherman, president of the RIAA, wants to send a message that Internet2 isn’t “a zone of lawlessness where the normal rules don’t apply,” according to the Associated Press. But file-sharing surveillance, apparently, should be a zone of conduct in which normal rules don’t apply. Access to filed content, apparently, should be expected of any experimental technology, is restricted.

Doug Van Houweling, Internet2’s chief executive, told the Associated Press that no special access has been provided to the RIAA for it to gather information for these lawsuits.

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“Sting Break was cool despite all the fire alarms that went off.”

Sid Roy
BME Freshman

“It was incredibly intense.”

Photos by Michael Skinnor
Grad community needs more than labs to flourish

"The communities we form in graduate school...may be every bit as important as the theses we turn out."

Karen Feigh
Columnist

This last column of mine was going to spend extolling the difficulties faced by graduate students at the beginning of every semester as they struggle to pay their fees, housing and health insurance. While this is a huge problem, it is rather well known, and I feel I have touched on it enough in previous columns. Today I wish to discuss a similarly large problem—one for which sources and solutions are far more vague than the semester start-up problem. The issue is the sense of community among graduate students, or rather the lack of community.

What is community and how do we achieve it?

To me, community is the feeling you get when you belong somewhere, feeling as if your presence is important and valued. It often seems that we graduate students just disappear into our labs, into our work, into our own little worlds.

Living such isolated lives, we never seem to achieve any sense of community. This feeling of seclusion may be especially acute for students who feel isolated from the other members of their lab because of gender, race or culture.

I have spoken to other female graduate students who tell me that they are the only women in their laboratory or that their lab is not an invitation for the men to converse in this language, thereby excluding them (probably inadvertently).

Perhaps the greatest challenge in the development of community in the precious commodity of time.

Who has time to sit down just to talk to someone?

Who has time to do anything but attend their classes and mind their research?

I for one often feel that I definitely don't have time to commit to anything or any one. This is wrong.

Taking the time to get to know your colleagues, to be involved in something else besides your research is not just a good idea, I'd say that it is vital to begin to build a sense of community.

After all, these are the people whom you will someday work with in the mythical "real world."

Another aspect of community building is that it cannot be done en masse. Communities are built one brick at a time; one friendship, one lunch, one activity at a time. I would argue that communities are built in small groups, not large ones.

As wonderful as the large scale concerts and events that take place around campus, I do not come away from them necessarily having met any new people. Mostly I just come away knowing the small group of friends I went with a little bit better.

My point being that these large activities are not necessarily the best thing to grow or expand the feeling of community.

Some ideas (mostly borrowed ones from other universities) that might help establish and foster a greater sense of community within the graduate student population at Tech include: dining groups, cooperative graduate dining halls, activities aimed at graduate students just as there are activities also aimed at freshmen.

Graduate students are the individuals that will be teaching and taking the lead in the sciences, engineering and social sciences in the coming decades.

The communities we form in graduate school at Tech may be every bit as important as the theses we turn out.

For we need to learn not only to think for ourselves, but how to collaborate with others. Roughly 43,000 doctors graduate every year from America’s colleges and institutes. Hopefully these 43,000 doctors are not just viewed as individuals, but are instead viewed as co-workers, colleagues and more importantly, as friends.

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